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Sever All Ties with Police Unions

In Chicago and everywhere, the social struggle to defund police departments is only hampered by labor’s ties with police unions. A movement to sever ties will have to come from the rank and file.

Joe Allen, Rampant, June 4, 2020

When Bill McCarthy, the president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO, called for the resignation of Bob Kroll, the president of Minneapolis police officers' federation, it was something of a bombshell going off in the labor movement. McCarthy's reasons were pretty straightforward:

Bob Kroll has a long history of bigoted remarks and complaints of violence made against him. As union President, he antagonizes and disparages members of the Black community. He advocates for military-style police tactics making communities less safe and the police force more deadly. Despite his conduct, Kroll was reelected with an overwhelming majority. If Bob Kroll does not value the lives that he is sworn to protect, then we can only expect more death under his leadership.

Soon afterwards, Denise Specht, the president of Education Minnesota, the statewide teachers' federation, supported McCarthy's call for Kroll's resignation,

Educators and other members of organized labor are committed to seeking racial justice. There is no place for leaders who support or defend racist actions and policies in our movement. Through his actions and words, Lt. Kroll has shown himself unfit to lead in the modern labor movement.

Kroll is a favorite of president Donald Trump, not surprisingly, and whether he resigns is another matter. He is popular with his membership. However, the leaders of US unions rarely call for the resignation or disciplining of fellow trade union officers. One of the few

and far between examples happened in 1957. The AFL-CIO even took the step of expelling the Teamsters from the federation after years of investigations into corruption and mob ties and the refusal of the Teamsters to clean house.

Yet, the AFL-CIO infamously didn't apply the same standard to disciplining unions for racist practices. In the late 1950s and 1960s, A. Philip Randolph, the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and one of most important Black leaders in US history, repeatedly failed to get AFL-CIO leader George Meany to expel racist unions from the federation. For his troubles, Randolph was mind-bogglingly sanctioned for "causing the gap that has developed between organized labor and the Negro community." For Meany, Randolph was the problem, not racism.

So, it is a big step forward all these years later that the leadership of police "unions" are finally getting their just deserts over racism by other trade union leaders. While police unions are affiliated nationally with the main trade union federation, the AFL-CIO, they are not affiliated locally. At the same, they share some common interests—wage increases and pension and medical benefits—with other public sector workers, especially the firefighters.

This was vividly displayed to me at the dedication of the Haymarket monument in the West Loop in 2004, one of the strangest political events I ever attended. Dennis Gannon, the then head of the Chicago Federation of Labor, embraced Mark Donahue, the president of Chicago's Fraternal Order of Police at the time,

who told the crowd that although police officers were often used to repress the labor movement a century ago, they are now part of it. “We’ve come a long way,” Donahue stated. “We recognize that the people who fought for labor rights in the past gave us the protections we have today.”

Kicking the cops and their malign influence out of our unions is crucial at this historic moment.

While many international unions, affiliated with the AFL-CIO or the stillborn Change to Win, issued very moving statements about the murder of George Floyd and demands for racial justice, they deliberately overlooked or excused the large bargaining units made up of cops, sheriff’s deputies, and even prison guards that they represent. Some unions in the past even campaigned to keep prisons open. These unions include the Teamsters, SEIU, AFSCME, the American Federation of Government Employees, and the Communication Workers of America.

Keeping up pressure on the police unions is important to the fight against racism, and I would even argue it’s important to fighting fascism in this country. Kicking the

cops and their malign influence out of our unions is crucial at this historic moment. It is very doubtful that the leaders of major unions will do this on their own, it must come from the rank and file. It won't be a welcome discussion, either. Union officials will dismiss it as a distraction from real issues. Not only is this about fighting racism but also about the very nature of some unions. Do unions organize their core industries with real bargaining power or are they scattershot, general unions with weak bargaining power?

Keep in mind that in the 1980s and 1990s, when many industrial unions were collapsing and merging with others to survive, they got into organizing outside of their traditional core industries that were deregulating, breaking unions, or moving overseas. The Teamsters, for example, literally collapsed in the freight industry, once their stronghold. Organizing the public sector, where shops can't flee, was one solution to a shrinking membership. Cops and prisons, after all, were a booming business for forty years.

Chicago

The Chicago Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) is a prime example of the reactionary role that so-called cop unions play in local politics. The Chicago Lodge 7 represents 8,200 officers out of 13,500 in the Chicago Police Department (CPD). The FOP is one of a number of high-profile police organizations that gained national notoriety for its longstanding defense of police torturers like the late Chicago police commander Jon Burge, and

of convicted murderers like Jason Van Dyke. The FOP is a horrible institution by any measure, that aggressively protects the worst elements of the CPD and takes consistently backward political positions on every question.

The FOP's newly elected president is John Catanzara, who defeated the incumbent president Kevin Graham, winning nearly 55 percent of the vote in a three-way race. Catanzara is another favorite of president Donald Trump, who tweeted to him, "Congratulations to Officer John Catanzara for being elected president of the Chicago Police Union. He always 'gets the job done.' #MAGA."

Trump, from the earliest days of his 2016 presidential campaign, courted cops and police unions. Catanzara and Trump are a match made in heaven. He has a long and despicable record. Catanzara is bigot and racist of the first order and came to national attention because of social media posts that proclaimed his support for Trump and the second amendment. A reporter for *ProPublica*, the investigative journalism institute that frequently partners with PBS's *Frontline* program, reported that, "Catanzara, 49, already is among the most disciplined officers in the department. The 23-year veteran has been suspended seven times for a total of 111 days."

The FOP and Trump have both opposed the Obama administration's consent decree to reform the practices of the Chicago Police Department. Trump has committed to a position of supporting police violence and opposing the most mild police reform. Catanzara's

support for Trump may be the tip of the iceberg of even more sinister connections to the far right, but nothing further has been revealed, so far. The Chicago Police Department is currently investigating another of its officers for being a member of the fascist Proud Boys.

Catanzara's only comments about the current rebellion against racist police violence have complained that City Hall should have given CPD even more resources to crack down on peaceful protests. But I'm sure he's also operating behind the scenes. The malign influence of the FOP is always there. Many cops are married to other public sector workers, especially teachers, and that has caused problems inside the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). The CTU has been one of the only unions in Chicago that has criticized the Chicago Police Department's practice. Against the CTU's laudable role as a core antiracist institution in the city of Chicago, a right-wing opposition caucus in the CTU has formed around these issues.

Also, those parts of Chicago that cops live in are notorious for electing some of the most backward aldermen. They are the same neighborhoods in the Northwest and Southwest sides of Chicago that voted for Donald Trump, and, embarrassingly for the residents of the Mount Greenwood neighborhood, for the open Nazi, Art Jones. The FOP was also involved in blocking antiracist speakers at elementary schools and trying to sabotage curriculum mandated by a city settlement with torture victims of Jon Burge.

However repulsive the FOP is, the Chicago Police Department is the main focus of current protest organizing, and rightfully so. The CPD is funded

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by the city taxpayers at $1.78 billion in 2020, and the mayor and city council have the power to defund them. Since the time of the Haymarket affair through the Memorial Day Massacre to murder of Black Panther leaders to the reign of Jon Burge, the CPD is the main enemy of the working class and oppressed in our city. It’s time to dismantle policing in the city of Chicago.

- Joe Allen

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